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### Good Jew, Bad Jew

Act differently from the Jews, for they do not pray in their sandals or their shoes.<sup>1</sup>

The people of the Scripture [i.e., Jews] used to recite the Torah in Hebrew and they used to explain it in Arabic to the Muslims. On that God's Messenger said, "Do not believe the people of the Scripture or disbelieve them, but say, 'We believe in Allah and what is revealed to us'" (Q 2/136).<sup>2</sup>

The actual Jewish communities that Muhammad would have encountered on the Arabian Peninsula and interacted with are very difficult, if not impossible, to reconstruct.<sup>3</sup> Despite the proximity of the region to Palestine, both at the time of the Second Temple period and to centers of Jewish life and learning there after its destruction, these Arabian Jews remain an enigma,<sup>4</sup> and basic and fundamental questions remain.<sup>5</sup> Who, for example, where they?<sup>6</sup> Where did they come from? And, perhaps most importantly, what kind of Judaism did they believe in or practice?<sup>7</sup> The Jewish communities on the Arabian Peninsula thus pose a number of intractable problems. Rather than start from the assumption that a stable and normative Judaism birthed an unstable Islam, just as it was believed to have done with Christianity at the other end of late antiquity,<sup>8</sup> it is necessary to begin with the premise that Judaism at this time and in this location was, by definition, non-normative and certainly underdefined.<sup>9</sup>

Such historical questions, however, certainly did not bother subsequent generations of Muslim thinkers, who largely continued to think with Jews as a way to think about themselves. In all of these constructions Arabian Jews are imagined as normative, rabbinic, and authentic. This is not so much a historical problem as it is a theological and a literary one. At work was a complicated dialectic: The early Jewish community with whom Muhammad

ostensibly interacted provided the paradigm for thinking about all future Jewish-Muslim relations on the one hand, just as later Jewish communities contributed to and helped give definition to the Jews recounted in the Qur'an and the early Islamic literary tradition on the other. This circular process—using later groups to expand upon earlier categories and then deploying these early categories to understand later groups—was a common theme in the way that early Islamic thinkers produced knowledge about religious others.

Previous chapters witnessed the creation and subsequent elaboration of a set of autochthonous categories to define what was slowly emerging as correct belief. All of these categories took place, as just witnessed, within the *longue durée* provided by the *jāhiliyya*. Jews and Christians, as this and the following chapter will demonstrate, fit ambiguously within this pre-Islamic ethos. While such groups believed in the oneness of God, the nature and quality of their beliefs ostensibly made them different from unbelievers and hypocrites. However, at the same time, the fact remained that they ultimately chose not to join the community of believers as Muslims. Their intransigence, then, meant that they potentially posed a bigger threat to Muslims on account of their incorrect, partial, or otherwise corrupted monotheism.

To demonstrate this, the first two chapters of part II will focus on those recognizable others that had been present—in some way, shape, or form—from the very beginning of Islam. Whereas part I of this study, for the most part, focused on the repercussions of a set of autochthonous terms generated by the Qur'an, the chapters that compose part II deal with specific religious others. Muslim thinkers, I argue, continued to need the categories and ideas developed in the Qur'an to think about alterity and to develop and build upon rubrics into which social and religious others could still be located and their ideas and beliefs placed. For these others to be understood, in other words, they continued to be mediated through the qur'anic text. Even though real Jews were encountered, for example, they were ultimately processed using categories that the Qur'an had developed. Such categories reduced Jews to those who had originally received a message resembling that of Islam but who, on account of their own devices and craftwork, went astray. They not only changed their own religion, so the qur'anic narrative went, but also convinced Christians to do the same. This is the script that the Qur'an provided for the Jews, and in subsequent literature a set of highly stylized Jews were made to mouth their lines.

Most of our Arabic sources, then, are less interested in historical Jews than they are in literary ones. Such literature, to use the words of Wansbrough,

seeks to establish “the isolation of semiological space into which may be inserted a selection of themes and symbols intended to recall the event of revelation.”<sup>10</sup> The Jew in the text, building upon his comments, is a metaphor for what the potential rejection of Muhammad’s message might look like. These Jews, to continue with Wansbrough’s semiotic metaphor, function as a placeholder that, while necessary for syntactic restraints, nevertheless provides us with little or no semantic information. If Wansbrough is correct, and I suspect that he is, “what we know of the seventh-century Ḥijāz (the area of Mecca, Medina, and environs) is the product of intense literary activity, then that record has got to be interpreted in accordance with what we know of literary criticism.”<sup>11</sup>

The result is that we must use these sources with caution. In what follows in part II, I examine relevant literature—which includes historical annals, prosopographical compendia, works of belles-lettres, and treatises of theology and heresiography—as a series of mutually overlapping reflections that tell us about how Muslim communities understood themselves and their social world. One of the primary means by which they went about this was by taxonomizing religious others that they encountered.

### The Trope of Jewish Deceit

It is a common theme within the history of religions that perceived innovations or challenges to orthodoxy are presented as foreign contagions. It is certainly not something that is unique to our Muslim sources. We frequently see this trope in non-Muslim accounts. For example, Byzantine sources often reduce iconoclastic tendencies to the influence of both Jewish and Muslim converts.<sup>12</sup> We also witness how non-Muslim accounts of the origins of Islam imagine a Jewish influence. The Nestorian author of the Syriac *Apocalypse of Sergius Baḥīrā*, for example, describes Muhammad as the student of Baḥīrā, an Arab Christian ascetic briefly mentioned in the previous chapter and who will play a larger role in the following one, but who later fell under the negative influence of a Jew by the name of Kaʿb al-Aḥbār.<sup>13</sup> According to the *Apocalypse*, “Kaʿb the Scribe—cursed be his memory—passed on [faulty information] to the Ishmaelites. He confounded and corrupted everything that Sergius [i.e., Baḥīrā] had written originally. For the sons of Ishmael were uncivilized pagans, like horses without a bridle.”<sup>14</sup>

In another passage Ka'b is the one held to be responsible for corrupting the Qur'an, which the *Apocalypse* presents as given to Muhammad from Baḥīrā. We read that

after the death of Sergius, Ka'b the Scribe rose up and he changed the writings of Sergius Baḥīrā and he handed down another teaching to them. And he put in it confusion, corruption, superstitions, ridiculous and arbitrary things, circumcision, ablution, "an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth," and "a killing for a killing." And divorce, and that when a woman is repudiated, if another man does not take her, he cannot return to her. . . . Not the slightest fear of God was to be found in it, because all that Sergius had handed down to them had been changed by Ka'b the Jew.<sup>15</sup>

I shall discuss Ka'b al-Aḥbār, a central Jewish convert to Islam, later, showing how the early Muslim community regarded him more positively and as an important conduit between the ancient lore of the Jews and the new message of Muhammad. It is worth mentioning in the present context, however, that Christian polemicists portray him as a deceitful character who encouraged the early Muslim community to stray from Christianity. It is also worth mentioning how this early polemical literature invokes the motif of *tahrīf*, or "tampering," with scriptures, with now Muslims guilty as charged. Muslim thinkers, it will be recalled, used this trope to show how and why the qur'ānic message differed from the scriptures of the Jews and Christians. Whereas Muslim thinkers argued that both of these earlier monotheistic communities had corrupted their messages by changing them to suit their own needs and for their own ends, here the authors of the *Apocalypse* invoke the same charges against Muslims, and, just like the early Muslim thinkers, they put the blame squarely on the shoulders of "the Jews."

Within this context it is perhaps worth mentioning that this story also circulates in Jewish sources,<sup>16</sup> only now "the Jews" who join Muhammad are portrayed as "misguided." This takes its most popular form in the tale of the ten wise Jews who converted to Islam to protect the Jewish people, and who were believed to be responsible for writing the Qur'an. In the Christian account of Theophanes (d. 818), a Byzantine chronicler, we read:

At the beginning of his advent the misguided Jews thought he was the Messiah who is awaited by them, so that some of their leaders joined him and accepted his religion while forsaking that of Moses who saw God.

Those who did so were ten in number and they remained with him until his first sacrifice. But when they saw him eating camel meat, they realized he was not the one they thought him to be and were at a loss what to do. Being afraid to abjure his religion, these wretched men taught him illicit things directed against us Christians and remained with him.<sup>17</sup>

Theophanes here kills two birds with one stone, as it were. He discredits the lack of originality in Islam by reducing it to a Jewish conspiracy, both of which are subsequently directed against the true message of Christianity. In all of these accounts, whether of the Muslim or Christian variety, Jews have to be discredited. As the perceived harbingers of monotheism, it is not enough to ignore them; rather, their errors must be put on full display so that the new religion or movement can be clearly delineated therefrom and presented as the religion that Judaism could have been. Within this context, of especial concern for new religious traditions is the trope of the “crypto-Jew,” to wit, the Jew who converts to the new religion but is believed to retain his or her old traditions in secret.<sup>18</sup> Such an individual is, of course, the ultimate threat. He or she ostensibly looks and acts like others but, by virtue of that similitude, threatens the community from within.

### **“Jews” and the Need for Differentiation in Subsequent Literature**

If the Qur’ān was initially ambiguous in its treatment of the Jews, its later verses tend to be rather consistent in its negative descriptions of them. Subsequent literature expands upon the latter. We now begin to see qur’ānic Jews fleshed out and given greater definition, with their initial traits often amplified in the process. Earlier themes of perfidy and betrayal are now narratively expanded, and in such a manner that they take on the role of essential character traits. The early *Sīra* literature, as witnessed in chapter 2, for example, portrays the Jews as the villains from whom the young prophet must be protected. Ibn Hishām picks up on the theme of duplicity when he tells us that

the Jewish rabbis [of Medina] showed hostility to the apostle in envy, hatred, and malice, because God had chosen His apostle from the Arabs. They were joined by men from al-Aus and al-Khazraj who had obstinately clung

to their heathen religion. They were hypocrites [*munāfiqūn*], clinging to the polytheism of their fathers denying the resurrection; yet when Islam appeared and their people flocked to it they were compelled to pretend to accept it to save their lives. But in secret they were hypocrites [*munāfiqūn*] whose inclination was towards the Jews because they considered the apostle a liar and strove against Islam.<sup>19</sup>

This passage is interesting for a number of reasons. First, we see how the Jews are now neatly, too neatly, differentiated from Muslims. Whereas in chapter 2 we witnessed how Jews, as part of the *Constitution of Medina*, were presumably seen as an intimate part of the fledgling community in Medina, here their presence is portrayed in distinctly negative terms. Second, and relatedly, Jews and unbelievers are grouped together in their denial of Jesus's resurrection. It would seem that followers of Muhammad and Christians are imagined on one side of an ontic divide, with Jews and unbelievers occupying the other as *munāfiqūn*. Jews, then, threaten both Christians and Muslims. Third, we encounter Jews as those who encourage a duplicitous relationship to the new message. Not unlike 'Abdallāh ibn Saba', Islam's arch heretic whom we shall encounter shortly, Jews actively encourage "heathens" to pretend to be believers externally, all the while practicing their own religion internally.

Ibn Hishām continues the previous passage by explaining how the Jews used to tease the Prophet:

It was the Jewish rabbis who used to annoy the apostle with questions and introduce confusion, so as to confound truth with falsity. The Qur'ān used to come down in reference to these questions of theirs, though some of the questions about what was allowed and forbidden came from the Muslims themselves. . . . These were the Jewish rabbis, the rancorous opponents of the apostle and his companions, the men who asked questions, and stirred up trouble against Islam to try to extinguish it.<sup>20</sup>

Jews are here presented as seeking to sow discord in the young community. They function as tricksters who desire to undermine the beliefs of others.<sup>21</sup> They ask questions, with nefarious intentions, of Muhammad so that he will supply wrong answers, thereby making a mockery of his message. These Jews, faceless and often nameless, function as metonyms for all Jews, seeking to undermine the fledgling community in the same manner that they

were accused of undermining Christianity. This does not mean that Muslims envisioned Christians and Christianity as their natural allies. Indeed, as we shall witness in the following chapter, the young Muslim community also sought to distance itself from them, but in different ways.

Ibn Hishām further remarks on the perfidy of “the Jews” when he recounts the story of adulterers whom Muhammad ruled had to be stoned on account of their transgression. When a Jew disagrees with Muhammad’s sentence, Ibn Hishām relates the following story:

So God sent down concerning them: “O apostle, let not those who vie with one another in unbelief sadden thee, those who say with their mouths, We believe, but their hearts do not believe, those Jews who listen to lies, listening for other people who do not come to thee,” i.e., those who sent others and stayed behind themselves and gave them order to change the judgement from its context. Then He said, “they change words from their places.”<sup>22</sup>

Ibn Hishām here describes the Jews as unwilling to believe their own scriptures. If they do not like a ruling, he intimates, they change it to suit their need. Indeed, after Muhammad had ordered the couple to be stoned, the Prophet asked for a Torah to justify his ruling:

A rabbi sat there reading it having put his hand over the verse of stoning. ‘Abdallāh b. Salām struck the rabbi’s hand away, saying, “This, O prophet of God, is the verse of stoning which he refuses to read to you.” The apostle said, “Woe to you Jews! What has induced you to abandon the judgement of God which you hold in your hands?”<sup>23</sup>

If Jews are the epitome of duplicitousness and malfeasance, there must, by necessity, be “good” Jews who show their coreligionists the error of their ways. Here ‘Abdallāh b. Salām, a Jewish convert to Islam whom I shall examine in greater detail shortly, exposes the corruption of his erstwhile community. In a subsequent section, Ibn Hishām holds the Jews responsible for forming a party against Muhammad in Medina and inviting the Quraysh of Mecca to join them. The latter asks the Jews, “You, O Jews, are the first people of the Book [*ahl al-kitāb*] and know the nature of our dispute with Muhammad. Is our religion best or is his?” The Jews replied that “certainly [your] religion was better than his and [you] have a better claim to be right.”<sup>24</sup>

The Jews, once again, are presented as taking the side of Muhammad's enemies, and furthermore actively instigating them to fight against the Prophet. In this, they function as a foil to the piety of the true community of believers.

This juxtaposition is brought out further in the *ḥadīth* literature. I mentioned earlier the problems of dating this literature but again use it here as a window onto the early community's relationship to other religious traditions, whether actual or imagined. Numerous *ḥadīths* attributed to the Prophet, for example, seem concerned that Muslims do not imitate the practices and beliefs of Jews and Christians. "He who imitates a people," according to the report that opens this chapter, "is one of them."<sup>25</sup> Or, "he who imitates others does not belong to us, do not imitate Jews and Christians."<sup>26</sup> Working on the assumption that such *ḥadīths* exist precisely because such activities were going on, we can read such statements as attempts on the part of the framers of the early community to draw further lines between it and more entrenched communities with whom they were increasingly in contact and in competition.<sup>27</sup> Indeed, as Rubin notes, cognate traditions also circulated that warned Muslims who engaged in such practices that they risked becoming apes or pigs in the hereafter.<sup>28</sup>

This negative portrayal of Jews, I maintain, is associated with the need on the part of the early Muslim community to differentiate itself from them and to chart its own destiny by not falling back on old paradigms and narratives. Yet, such paradigms and narratives were paradoxically needed to legitimate the new message. To engage in this process of negation and differentiation, the community first had to show just when, where, why, and how Jews went astray. In apparent response to claims that early Muslims were consulting Jews and Christians about their scriptures, Ibn 'Abbās is reported to have said, "You ask the People of the Book about their books, while you have with you the book of God. You should use [your own] as the closest of the scriptures when it comes to knowledge of God, one wherein imperfection has not been mixed."<sup>29</sup> Though interesting, the Prophet was also reported to have been asked, "O Apostle of God, are we not to narrate [stories] concerning the children of Israel?," to which Muhammad responded, "Narrate, there is not sin."<sup>30</sup>

We also see this anxiety in those *ḥadīths* that target generic Jewish practices, thereby further contributing toward an essentialized Judaism. These can take the form of rather benign warnings against dressing like Jews in prayer. Muslims are warned, for example, not to wear only one garment, as the Jews do, but instead "let he who has two garments dress himself and then pray."<sup>31</sup> In like manner, it is reported that 'Ā'ishah, Muhammad's third and youngest wife, "used to hate that one should keep his hands on



his flanks while praying. She said that the Jew used to do so.”<sup>32</sup> Or, in the name of Muhammad: “act differently from the Jews, for they do not pray in their sandals or their shoes.”<sup>33</sup> The early *ḥadīth* literature also portrays Jews as aware of how Muhammad and the early community sought to do the opposite of them. We read, for example:

Among the Jews, when a woman menstruated, they did not dine with her, nor did they live with them in their houses; so, the Companions of the Apostle asked the Apostle, and Allah, the Exalted revealed: “And they ask you about menstruation; say it is a pollution, so keep away from woman during menstruation” (Q 2/222). The Messenger of Allah said: Do everything except intercourse. The Jews heard of that and said: This man does not want to leave anything we do without opposing us in it.<sup>34</sup>

Muslims are also told not to imitate the Jews who build “places of worship at the graves of their prophets.”<sup>35</sup> Likewise, Muhammad informs his followers that “the Jews and the Christians do not dye (their hair), so oppose them.”<sup>36</sup> Muslims, in other words, are encouraged to dress, practice, and greet one another differently from the manner of other monotheists.<sup>37</sup>

Early Muslims existing on the Arabian Peninsula and spreading out in the conquest period inhabited a shared social and intellectual space with others. In that context, a wide variety of beliefs—monotheism, messianism, and apocalypticism in response to growing political instability, prayer and belief, and so on—were widely distributed. The subsequent articulation and maintenance of border markers between what was “Islam” and what was “Judaism” took considerable intellectual labor. This involved both demonizing—or, at the very least, showing the errors of—Jewish customs, belief, and praxis, and thereby creating various taxonomies for them. The latter involved trying to show what Jews did or at least were imagined to do, and what Muslims should do in contrast. In the following *ḥadīth*, we read:

The people of the Scripture [i.e., Jews] used to recite the Torah in Hebrew and they used to explain it in Arabic to the Muslims. On that God’s Messenger said, “Do not believe the people of the Scripture or disbelieve them, but say, ‘We believe in Allah and what is revealed to us.’” (Q 2/136)<sup>38</sup>

Though it is impossible to know if Muhammad’s Jews actually knew Hebrew, or if they even possessed a Torah,<sup>39</sup> it is important to those who

collected the *ḥadīth* that these Jews be rabbinic. This helped them to clarify, again all too neatly, Islam from Judaism in the earliest period. Indeed, we see this differentiation in the following:

The Messenger of God said: “Allah led those who came before us astray from Friday. Saturday was for the Jews and Sunday was for the Christians. And they will lag behind us until the Day of Resurrection. We are the last of the people of this world but we will be the first to be judged among all of creation.”<sup>40</sup>

Not only does this explain Muslim practice, but it also shows how such practice is a restoration of what the other religions had before they went astray. Muslim practice, like Islam more generally, is that which Judaism wanted to be but, for a variety of reasons, was unable or incapable of attaining.

Alternatively, some *ḥadīths* can take on a more cynical turn, such as when Muhammad suggests that “The Jews are those who Allah is wrath with, and the Christians have strayed.”<sup>41</sup> Or in reference to Q 15/90 (“Just as we have sent down [the Scripture] on those who are separated”), we read that the Jews and Christians “believed in part of it and disbelieved in the other [*amanū bi-ba‘din wa-kafarū bi-ba‘din*].”<sup>42</sup> Regardless of the intensity of the characterization, it is worth reiterating that that early Muslim community needed to define itself. The only way to do this was to prevent Muslims—and, of course, non-Muslims—from mistaking the new religion for its predecessors. This was obviously being done or else there would not have been the constant need to warn against such practices. In this regard, Judaism allowed Islam to define itself while at the same time helping to legitimate it. These are recurring themes and tropes that we shall witness throughout all of the remaining chapters. This is certainly not anti-Semitism or even anti-Judaism, as some contemporary neo-conservative pundits might opine, just the natural process of seeking to differentiate one community from others with which it shares basic filiations and commonalities.

### ‘Abdallāh ibn Saba’: The Arch-Heretic

Perhaps the most famous Jew in all of Islamic literature is ‘Abdallāh ibn Saba’, believed to have been a Jew from Yemen who converted to Islam after the death of Muhammad.<sup>43</sup> His date of conversion is perhaps significant from

a literary point of view since it meant that he never actually met the Prophet in person, implying that this might well be the reason for the lack of respect for his message. At any rate, it is Ibn Saba', more than anyone, who is credited with subverting the pristine unity (*jamā'a*) of the early Muslim community. Were it not for him and his deceitful actions, it is imagined that the originary community would have remained unified and immune from subsequent sectarianism. Whether or not he was an actual Jew—after all, what did an “actual Jew” mean in the context of early seventh-century Arabia?<sup>44</sup>—of significance to my argument is that the early and subsequent Muslim community imagined him to be not just a Jew, but *the* Jew par excellence: one who embodied all of the negative personality traits that the Qur'ān had already ascribed to Jews.

According to al-Ṭabarī, Ibn Saba'

was a Jew from Ṣan'a', and his mother was a black woman. He converted to Islam in the time of 'Uthmān, then roamed around about the lands of the Muslims attempting to lead them into error. He began in the Ḥijāz, and then [worked] successively in Basra, Kufa, and Syria. He was unable to work his will upon a single one of the Syrians, they drove him out and he came to Egypt. He settled among the Egyptians, saying to them, among other things, “How strange is it that some people claim that Jesus will return, while denying that Muhammad will return. Now Almighty God has said, ‘He who ordained the Qur'ān for thee will surely restore thee to a place of return [Q 28/85].’ Now surely Muhammad is more worthy that Jesus to return.”<sup>45</sup>

Ibn Saba' is thus portrayed religiously as a Jew and racially as a non-Arab. In this, he exemplifies the two negative traits that threaten the young community, and al-Ṭabarī certainly draws attention to these characteristics. The latter also mentions how the followers of Ibn Saba', in both Iraq and Syria, began to conspire with one another.<sup>46</sup> Once converted, we learn that he began to study theological speculation and that “through him the world fell into chaos and baneful innovations arose.”<sup>47</sup>

By transforming Ibn Saba' into a religiously orthodox Jew of later centuries, subsequent commentators remove him successfully from the domains of “Muslimness” and “Arabness”—two categories, as witnessed previously, that were slowly coming into existence at roughly the same time to define the new religion. He thus stands before us stigmatized and fully discredited.<sup>48</sup> As the

foil to the fledgling community, he threatens that community with subversion and ultimate chaos. Here, Ibn Saba' is among the first instantiations of the tendency in Islamic sources to attribute subversive and extremist doctrines to Jewish origin and malfeasance. Indeed, as Sean Anthony has shown, Ibn Saba' is presented in the earliest Islamic historiographical and heresiographical tradition as the nemesis of the early community's caliphs, those recognized as the so-called *rashidūn* ("rightly guided").<sup>49</sup> He is made to be the first to recognize 'Alī as the true successor to Muhammad, of ascribing esoteric knowledge to him, and of cursing the three caliphs prior to him (i.e., Abū Bakr, 'Umar, and 'Uthmān) as illegitimate.<sup>50</sup> Such heretical behavior, signified as quintessentially Jewish, is subsequently responsible for the creation of the Shī'a, often imagined as *the* arch-heresy within the Islamic tradition.<sup>51</sup>

It is also worth noting that even subsequent Imāmī or Shī'ī sources insist on maintaining the Jewishness of Ibn Saba' rather than seek to deny the attribution.<sup>52</sup> This is because subsequent Shī'ī ideologues would hold him responsible for the introduction of *ghulūw* or "extremist" tendencies in the veneration of 'Alī, something that the later Shī'a discredited.<sup>53</sup> Of course, though, what was extremist was something that could only be decided after the fact. According to that tradition, it was the followers of Ibn Saba' who denied 'Alī's death and who instead argued for his messianic return. This tendency toward veneration was something, again according to later sources, that resulted from his Jewishness and his desire to fit 'Alī's relationship to Muhammad into a biblical framework of Joshua's succession to Moses.<sup>54</sup> The sin of Ibn Saba', according to both Sunnī and later Shī'ī sources, was his introduction of Jewish ideas into the heart of Islam. These included, but were certainly not limited to, the notion that, while still a Jew, he regarded Joshua as the natural inheritor of Moses's authority (*waṣiyya*), just as he would subsequently do to 'Alī and Muhammad once he became a Muslim.<sup>55</sup> As a result, to use Sean Anthony's words, Ibn Saba' is

nearly universally reviled as a noxious religiopath. He subsequently becomes a historiographical obsession because he stands at the pathological locus of Islam's earliest sectarian moment. He is not merely Islam's first heretic, but also (in a more literary sense) its most nefarious—its *arch-heretic*.<sup>56</sup>

One of the earliest treatments of Ibn Saba' appears in the work of the second/ninth-century Kūfan historian Sayf ibn 'Umar al-Tamīmī (d. ca. 180/

796), which has been examined in Anthony's study.<sup>57</sup> For Sayf, as indeed for the later heresiographical tradition more generally, Ibn Saba' is the one responsible for the first *fitna* ("civil strife" or "sedition") in Islam,<sup>58</sup> which witnessed the overthrow of the *rashidūn* caliphs and the establishment of the Umayyad dynasty in Damascus.<sup>59</sup>

Within this larger context it was the assassination of the third caliph 'Uthmān ibn 'Affān in 35/256 that inaugurated one of the first fractures in the young community. This revealed, perhaps more than any event, the fragility at the heart of the *umma*. On Sayf's reading it was Ibn Saba' and his acolytes, the Saba'iyya, who are the ones responsible for it and for causing and subsequently exploiting the rifts within the fledgling polity. They stand before the community as strife and discord incarnate. According to a report by Sayf:

Not a year had passed from the rule of 'Uthmān when men from the Quraysh appropriated properties in the garrison cities, and the people attached themselves to them. They were steadfast in doing this for seven years, while other groups desired that their leader should rule. Then Ibn Sawdā' [i.e., Ibn Saba'] converted to Islam and began to speculate in religious matters [*aslama wa-takallama*]. The world passed into chaos, and by his hands harmful innovations [*aḥdāth*] arose. People then felt that 'Uthmān's years were too long.<sup>60</sup>

Here Ibn Saba' is held up as the one responsible for the introduction of innovations into Muslim belief and practice, which led directly to the subsequent problems that plagued 'Uthmān's caliphate. These included, but were certainly not limited to, his preaching of Muhammad's imminent return. Again, according to Sayf, Ibn Saba'

would say, "What a marvel it is that some believe that Jesus will return while disbelieving that Muhammad will return! God Almighty has said, 'Indeed, He who has ordained the Qur'ān for you will bring you back to place of return [*inna alladhi fara ḍa 'alayka al-qur'āna la-rādduka ilā ma'ād*] (Q 28/85).' For Muhammad is more deserving of returning than Jesus!" That was accepted from [al-Saba'] [by his followers]. And he fabricated for them [the doctrine of return; *al-raj'a*], and they began to speculate over it.<sup>61</sup>

Here Ibn Saba' is credited with trying to trick early believers into thinking that Muhammad would return after his death. Just as the Jews had convinced

Jesus's followers to worship him as God, the Jew Ibn Saba' attempts to do the same to the early Muslim community. Though the idea of the imminent return of the Shī'ī Imām is certainly well attested in later sources, I follow Anthony here, who argues that by Muhammad's *raj'a*, Ibn Saba' would seem to mean his return from the dead (*raj'at al-amwāt*).<sup>62</sup>

Even the Jew who becomes a Muslim is under suspicion. This naturally builds on the suspicion that the qur'ānic text has for Jews. "The Jew"—and, by extension, "the Jews"—function as a contagion that has the potential to unleash foreign elements into the heart of Islam. Since Islam is, by definition, not-Judaism (or, by definition, not-Christianity), the articulation of Jewish (or Christian) beliefs—whether true, false, or exaggerated—is necessary for the health of Islam. The genre of heresiology, as we shall see even more clearly in chapter 6, becomes a necessary component for both articulating and maintaining orthodoxy.

Despite his desire to preach about 'Alī's messianic return, the Imāmī heresiographical tradition associated with Ibn Saba' ascribes the latter's execution at the hands of the former. According to the tradition of al-Kishshī, reported on the authority of Yūnus ibn 'Abd al-Raḥmān:

'Abdallāh ibn Saba' made a claim to prophecy while asserting that the Commander of the Faithful [i.e., 'Alī] is God. Word of this reached the Commander of the Faithful, so he called for him and questioned him. [Ibn Saba'] reaffirmed this and said, "Yes, you are he! It was cast into my heart that you indeed are God, and I am your prophet." The Commander of the Faithful said to him, "Woe to you, for Satan mocks you! Turn away from this, lest your mother be bereaved of you, and repent!" [Ibn Saba'] refused. ['Alī] imprisoned him and urged him to repent for three days, but he did not repent. Then 'Alī burned him alive with fire and said, "Satan led him astray with false imaginings. He would come to him and cast such things into his heart."<sup>63</sup>

Not only is Ibn Saba' guilty for his *ghulāt* practices (or, perhaps better, what will be imagined as a *ghulāt* practice in retrospect), but also, according to al-Kishshī, he takes on the mantle of prophecy for himself. Here he imagines himself as the prophet whose task is to recognize the divinity of 'Alī. In time the followers of Ibn Saba'—the so-called Saba'iyya—also became associated with other *ghulāt* or extremist views concerning the fourth and last of the rightly guided caliphs.

Ibn Saba' thus stands before the later Islamic tradition as doubly vilified. What would emerge as mainstream Sunnī Islam imagines him as the architect of sedition. At the same time, however, what will emerge as Twelver Shi'ism takes him to be the one responsible for introducing all sorts of unsavory beliefs and practices into the tradition—beliefs and practices, moreover, that are believed to derive from Jewish sources, and that needed to be weeded out. The figure of the perfidious Jew—or the perfidious Jewish convert—permits both the *ahl al-sunna* and the Shi'a to conveniently locate where, when, why, and how theological errors entered their respective traditions. Ibn Saba' as the convert, the one who enters into Islam and ostensibly embraces it, is certainly more dangerous than the Jew on the margins.

Ibn Saba' thus personifies perfidy. He can unleash (or undo)—whether as a literary creation or a historical persona is irrelevant for my argument—that which other internal forces cannot. As someone who came to the community from without, he undermines it from within. He is convenient; he is a stereotype; and most of all he contributes positively—by virtue of his negativity—to the early community's sense of its self. Without him, without the Jews, the *umma* would not be able to understand what was happening to it and its place in the late antique Middle East. The Jews, in sum, are increasingly necessary for the articulation not only for what Islam is not but also, just as importantly, for what it is.

### **The Good Jew: 'Abdallāh b. Salām and Ka'b al-Aḥbār**

If “the Jew” can be a villain needed to carve out space for proper belief, there must also exist Jews who function in the opposite capacity. The “good” Jew is also necessary because, again as a textual trope if not an actual historical individual, he symbolizes the conduit between the old revelation and the new. If the “bad” Jew sought to undermine Muhammad's message, the “good” Jew legitimates it. The latter individual, familiar with ancient Jewish lore and traditions, can be made to prophesy the coming of Muhammad as predicted, for example, in the original and untampered version of the Torah. In the later Islamic literary tradition, the “good” Jew also becomes the person who seeks to protect the Prophet from the intrigues of his erstwhile coreligionists. These “good” Jews are also multipurpose. They predict; they warn; and they protect. In so doing, they become, like their doppelgangers, literary characters who further aid in the articulation of the new message.

Wherever there is an intersection between Islam and another religion, there always exists the potential for anxiety. The old can only be used when it has either been fully denigrated or shown to be misunderstood by those who produced it, and then reconstituted by those who seek to repurpose it. Muslim thinkers, in other words, create their own pasts for other religions—pasts that conform to their own supersessionist agendas. According to tradition, ‘Abdallāh b. Salām (d. 43/663) was born in Medina within the tribe Banū Qaynuqā’ and originally had the name Ḥusayn.<sup>64</sup> When he converted to the new message—keeping in mind that there would very likely have been very little to convert to during this early period—shortly after Muhammad’s arrival in the town, Muhammad gave him the name ‘Abdallāh, that is, the “servant of God.”<sup>65</sup> According to al-Ṭabarī, he was with ‘Umar in Jerusalem and supported ‘Uthmān against the rebels. Also, according to him, when antigovernment rebels were set to attack ‘Uthmān in his home,

‘Abdallāh b. Salām came forth and stood at the door of the house, forbidding them to kill [‘Uthmān]. “O my people,” he said, “do not unsheathe God’s sword against yourselves. By God, if you draw it you will not put it back in its scabbard. Woe to you! Your government today is based on the whip, and if you kill him it will rest only on the sword. Woe to you! Your city is surrounded by God’s angels. By God, if you kill him they will surely forsake it.” “What is this to you, son of a Jewess?” they said and he withdrew.<sup>66</sup>

‘Abdallāh b. Salām here, as the voice of reason, functions as the prescient one who issues a warning to the rebels that any violence committed against the third caliph—and here the “good” Jew undoes what the “bad” Jew had set in motion—will only reverberate throughout the generations. Such violence would lead, in other words, to a host of other problems revolving around succession and inevitably draw in the larger community. However, the rebels refuse to listen to his warnings because, at least in the words al-Ṭabarī ascribes to them, he is the “son of a Jewess.”

According to the tradition preserved by al-Māliqī, ‘Abdallāh b. Salām says the following:

Do not do this! God has shielded you from the sword of discord ever since he brought out our prophet, Muhammad, and you will remain so until you kill your *imām*. If this happens, God will unleash the sword of the *fitna* on you, and not hold it back until the reemergence of Jesus. . . . Your town has



been guarded by the angels, ever since the messenger of God settled in it, but if you kill [‘Uthmān], they will abandon you until the Day of Judgement.<sup>67</sup>

It is interesting how al-Māliqī’s account preserves the mention of Jesus and shows how the early Muslim community imagined itself as caught up in a larger Near Eastern drama of salvation. Such traditions, not unlike many of the *isrā’īliyyāt*, as witnessed in a previous chapter, gradually began to fall out of favor in the later Islamic literary tradition.<sup>68</sup>

Regardless, the anxiety produced by the likes of ‘Abdallāh b. Salām means that, to some, he is the righteous non-Arab who could both predict and accept the message of Muhammad. However, to his enemies, ‘Abdallāh b. Salām will always be a problem—a Jew who, despite his conversion, nevertheless remains a Jew and, by extension, a threat to the fledgling community. In his description of Medina as “surrounded by Angels” and his warning of the fate that met other rebellious cities, Tayeb El-Hibri sees in him a biblical model of the rise and fall of nations.<sup>69</sup> This has the advantage, as we have seen, of linking Islam’s new history with the ancient history of the Israelites. Figures such as ‘Abdallāh b. Salām, I would suggest, provide the necessary link between the two traditions that certain framers so desired.

Despite the criticisms offered up by the rebels recounted previously, the later Islamic tradition finds tremendous praise for this Jewish convert. He is, for example, a character who regularly appears in prophetic *ḥadīth* as the scholar of Jewish scripture and of Jewish learning par excellence and as an individual who is destined for paradise.<sup>70</sup>

Ka’b al-Aḥbār,<sup>71</sup> a seventh-century Yemenite Jew who converted to Islam, according to al-Ṭabarī, in the first year of ‘Umar’s reign (13/634), plays a similar role in the fledgling community.<sup>72</sup> He thus follows, at least textually, in the path set out by ‘Abdallāh b. Salām, thereby representing a second-generation Jew who recognized the truth of Islam. According to the third/ninth-century biographer Ibn Sa’d, when asked why he waited until after the death of the Prophet to convert, Ka’b responded:

My father wrote out a book for me from the Torah and gave it to me. [My father] said, “Act according to this.” Then he sealed the rest of his books and took from me the right of a father from his son that I would not break the seal. When the time came and I saw that Islam had emerged and I did not see any harm in it, I said to myself, “Perhaps my father has concealed some knowledge from me. I should read it.” I opened the seal and read it, and in it

I found the description of Muhammad and his community. So now I come as a Muslim.<sup>73</sup>

Here Ka'b, as the embodiment of both religious and filial piety, is described as someone who was—unlike his former coreligionists—able to witness the truth and validity of the new religion. Even his father, who had written a book for him based on the Torah, predicted the coming of the new prophet. Once again, Ka'b serves as a link to the past.

The subsequent Islamic literary tradition remembers him as the oldest authority on Judeo-Islamic traditions, or *isrā'īliyyāt*.<sup>74</sup> The latter, as Wasserstrom argues, functioned as the primary means whereby the early community understood pre-Islamic history.<sup>75</sup> Relatedly, such stories also became the primary means that provided these Muslims with the categories—many of which were Near Eastern and/or biblical—used to understand themselves. Indeed, his last name is the plural of *ḥibr*, related to the Hebrew *ḥaber*, and is the technical designation for an 'alīm, or scholar.<sup>76</sup> Like 'Abdallāh b. Salām, Ka'b functions as a "the good Jew," someone who, as originally belonging to Judaism, can see and attest to the truth of Muhammad's message. Not only does he agree to join the new *umma*, but also he helps to give it form by providing it with the ancient patina that it so needed.

Ka'b is the wise person, knowledgeable in the Torah,<sup>77</sup> and, as such, someone who offers council to caliphs based on his ancient wisdom. When 'Umar wants to begin his administrative survey of the burgeoning empire, he asks Ka'b for his advice. The latter asks the caliph:

"Where would you like to make a start, Commander of the Faithful?" 'Umar replied, "Iraq." Ka'b said, "Do not do that. Evil and good both consist of ten parts. But whereas the one part that is good lies in the East and nine in the West, the one part that is evil lies in the West while the nine other evil parts lie in the East. The devil and every severe disease are linked with Iraq."<sup>78</sup>

This cryptic expression reveals Ka'b as a figure who, based on his knowledge of Jewish lore, can see into the future. When 'Umar arrives in Jerusalem, for example, Ka'b informs him, "O Commander of the Faithful, five hundred years ago a prophet predicted what you have done today."<sup>79</sup> At the same time, however, Ka'b is accused of introducing Jewish elements into the religion. Al-Ṭabarī, for example, preserves a story wherein 'Umar chastises him when he treats the Temple Mount in Jerusalem as holy.<sup>80</sup> Later, it is Ka'b who predicts

‘Umar’s death. And it is Ka’b who predicts Mu‘āwiyā’s succession just as he predicted ‘Umar’s.<sup>81</sup> He thus becomes, according to El-Hibri, the person who charts what would, in hindsight, be the “orthodox” path of successorship.<sup>82</sup>

### Medieval Heresiographical Literature

The medieval Islamic heresiographical tradition provides yet another window into how normative Islam envisaged minoritarian traditions. Many of these texts, which Wasserstrom has dubbed a precursor to the modern field of comparative religion,<sup>83</sup> seek to understand other religions while simultaneously undermining their truth claims.<sup>84</sup> Such an activity, of course, also allowed them to better understand themselves. Wasserstrom also aptly refers to the genre of heresiography as “the science of the errors of others.”<sup>85</sup> We should remember, however, that heresiography was not simply a theoretical enterprise, but an eminently practical affair. At stake was not just the articulation of orthodoxy through listing the heretical beliefs of others, but also the production of information on the beliefs of others for various legal purposes, such as classification of who was or was not part of the *ahl al-kitāb*, or “People of the Book,” which determined taxation and other matters.

The genre permits us access into the world of the construction of belief and, in so doing, affords us a glimpse of how such construction needs—nay, demands—the articulation of the misbelief of others. Heresiography, or the genre of documenting and making lists of heresies, is—from the comparative perspective that the history of religions offers us—a common way to articulate orthodoxy. Heresiography functions in two primary ways: First, it recounts the perceived heretical doctrines or ideas of others, showing how they have either gone or been led astray; second, and most importantly, it allows the group doing the writing to present what it is not, thereby defining itself—socially, religiously, and politically—dialectically in relation to others. Orthodoxy, in other words, demands heterodoxy and heresy for its own dogmatic clarification. It is against the standards of orthodoxy that heresies are ultimately judged and compared.

In this section I introduce three thinkers—Ibn Ḥazm (d.1064), al-Shahrastānī (d.1153), and Ibn Taymiyya (d.1328)—who will make several appearances in the chapters that follow, especially the sixth. Here, my goal is simply to draw briefly on their work to show how that tradition thought with and about Jews.<sup>86</sup> Their concern, to be expected, is less about Judaism and

actual Jews so much as it is about understanding and articulating what they consider to be their own normative construction of Islam. What follows does not claim to be an exhaustive account of these three authors so much as a survey of some of the themes whereby Judaism was constructed for a variety of internal needs.<sup>87</sup>

Ibn Ḥazm was a medieval Andalusī polymath and the author of works dealing with theology, jurisprudence, and literature. Perhaps his most famous work of theology is his *Kitāb al-fiṣal fī l-milal wa-l-ahwā' wa-l-niḥal* ("Book of Distinctions Between Religions, Heresies, and Sects"), and henceforth referred to as *Kitāb al-Fiṣal*, an encyclopedic text dealing with various religions and sects.<sup>88</sup> The work is arranged according to religious/philosophical groups that proximate Islam, beginning with those that are imagined to be farthest removed to those that are regarded as the closest, before moving on to a discussion of Muslim sects and heresies. Judaism, not surprisingly, falls into the category of those religions that most closely approximate Islam. This is why it is potentially so dangerous for him.

Al-Shahrastānī's *Kitāb al-Milal wa al-Niḥal* ("Book of Religions and Sects"), henceforth *Kitāb al-Milal*,<sup>89</sup> is not nearly as combative or polemical as that of Ibn Ḥazm. Using an obverse structure than the latter, Shahrastānī begins his book with Muslim sects and ends with those religions or philosophies that lack scriptures. Judaism, for him, is classified as a "religion of the book" and appears immediately after his recounting of Muslim sects.

Finally, Ibn Taymiyya was, even in his own day, a controversial theologian, legist, and reformer.<sup>90</sup> His iconoclastic views on widely accepted Sunnī doctrines such as the veneration of saints and the visitation to their tombshrines made him unpopular with the many other fellow Sunnī scholars of his day. If he was so critical of mainstream Sunnī practice and belief, his venom not surprisingly was also directed against non-Muslim religious traditions.

In terms of their actual writings, all three thinkers are in firm agreement with the orthodox Sunnī position that held the Jews to be in theological error on account of their incorrect beliefs. This was the direct result of their having taken an original and pristine revelation and then having decided to tamper with and corrupt it based on their own ideological desires. They thus stand before the community of believers as people that went astray and—just as importantly—they also function as a warning that, without proper interventions, the same could happen to Muslims and Islam. Ibn Ḥazm, for example, is critical of the ways in which the Jewish Bible presents its prophets by ascribing to them sinful behavior. He writes, for example, that

by God, I have never seen a people that, while accepting the concept of prophethood, ascribes to its prophets what those infidels ascribe to theirs. They said of Abraham that he was married to his sister, who bore him Isaac. Of Jacob they say that he married one woman, but that another woman who was not his wife was brought to him, and that this woman, bore him children from whom Moses, David, Solomon, and other prophets are descended.<sup>91</sup>

Jews, in other words, tell lies about their prophets, who are, by extension, also the prophets of Islam. Implicit here is that whereas the Jews defame their prophets, the Qur'ān portrays them as they really were, that is, as virtuous. The Hebrew Bible is thus judged according to the narrative criteria provided by the Qur'ān and found wanting. Since the Hebrew Bible tells lies about the lives of the prophets, it follows that the latter is a text that cannot be trusted on other levels. To read the true accounts of Israel's prophets, then, one must read them as they are presented within the Qur'ān. The Jews, according to Ibn Ḥazm, quite simply do not understand their own scripture:

The books that the Jews ascribe to Solomon are three in number. One of them is called *shar hashīrīm*, which means poem of poems [*shi'r al-ash'ār*], but actually it is folly of follies [*hawās al-ahwās*], for it is a silly discourse that makes no sense, and no one among [the Jews] knows its meaning. One time [in it] a man is being courted, and then suddenly a woman. I have seen [a Jew] go so far as to consider it an allegory of alchemy, which is another fine delusion.<sup>92</sup>

Not only are Jews in theological error, according to Ibn Ḥazm, but also they have so actively tampered with their scriptures that they no longer understand their true and original intent. It is a chicken-and-egg scenario, to be sure, as the one necessarily leads into the other. Another motif in this literature is that Jews (and subsequently Christians) removed all references to Muhammad and the inevitable coming of Islam in their scriptures. For example, he writes that

in the sixty-first Psalm [actually Psalm 72], it is said that the Arabs and the people of Saba will bring him riches and follow him [Psalm 72:10], and that blood will have its price for him [Psalm 72:14]. This is an exact description of the blood price [*diyya*] that only our religion has. In the same Psalm it also

says, “And he will appear from Medina” [Psalm 72:16], just like that, literally. Now this is an obvious prediction of the Apostle of God.<sup>93</sup>

Once again, Ibn Ḥazm claims that the Torah of his time was not the authentic one that was initially given to Moses. Here in particular, he takes the generic term for city “*madīna*” and reads it as referring to the actual city of Medina in the Ḥijāz. A clear reference to Muhammad’s coming, he informs his readers, has thus been erased from Jewish scriptures.

Though I shall have much more to say about al-Shahrastānī in chapter 6, I want only to mention in the present context that his main goal, not unlike that of Ibn Ḥazm, is that the Jews acknowledge that the Torah contains mention of Abraham and his son Ismā‘īl, but that God in the Qur’ān goes even further when he announces that he will “bless Ismā‘īl and his progeny, I have placed all good in them, I will dominate them over all nations, and I will soon send in them a messenger from among them who will recite My verses upon them.”<sup>94</sup> Once again, the place to learn about Judaism is not Jewish scripture, but the narratives that Islam has archived.

Like his predecessors, Ibn Taymiyya’s polemics against religious other pivots around the notion that their scriptures are corruptions, something that led them to add innovations (*bid’a*; pl. *bid’āt*) to their traditions. Prophets appear in them—prophets recognizable to any Muslim—but their negative treatment therein, it is implied, clearly signals they are incorrect. Again, the scriptures of previous religions attest to both the truth and superiority of the Qur’ān and Islam. Religious others’ pasts culminate in the pure version found in Muslim scripture.

In his *Kitāb al-Iman*, for example, Ibn Taymiyya, based on qur’ānic exegesis, upholds that Muslims are not to befriend other monotheists. According to him, God says,

“take note the Jews and the Christians for your friends and protectors: they are but friends and protectors on one another. And he among you who turns to them for friendship is one of them” [Q 5/51]. Indeed, God means in these verses that he who takes Jews and Christians as friends is not a believer. He also affirms that he who is a friend of one of them is one of them. Indeed, in the Qur’ān the verses are in harmony with and support one another. God says, “God has revealed the most beautiful Message in the form of a Book consistent with itself, yet repeating its teaching in various aspects” [Q 39/23].<sup>95</sup>

Here Ibn Taymiyya warns Muslims that they have all they need in the Qur'ān. To befriend rival monotheists, in other words, is to risk the same fates that they suffered. Jews are mistrustful because, while appearing like pious believers on the outside, there lurks in their hearts the *kufr*, something that they seek to use to undermine Muslims. According to Ibn Taymiyya:

The hypocrite is certainly not a believer, and whoever describes him thus is in error. The same applies to anyone in whose heart there resides knowledge and assent yet who at the same time displays ingratitude and enmity toward the Messenger. Such were the Jews and others, whom God declares to be unbelievers [*kuffār*] and never once referred to them as believers. . . . God excludes from belief those who believe with their tongues and their hearts but do not perform works.<sup>96</sup>

This theme is picked up in a significant *fatwā* of Ibn Taymiyya that further touches upon the sensitive question of Jews and Christians who secretly believe in Islam, and of Muslims who outwardly show belief but in reality are hypocrites hiding Jewish, Christian, or other beliefs. Some people claim that the angels remove from their graves the bodies of the Jews and Christians who secretly believed in Islam and place them in the graves of Muslims, and in contrast remove the bodies of unbelieving Muslims from their graves and place them in the graves of said Jews and Christians. Ibn Taymiyya had no knowledge of such a tradition. He states, however, that the Jews and Christians who secretly believed in Islam even if they did not declare their belief in Islam at their death will be gathered on the Day of Resurrection with the Muslims, while the unbelieving Muslims will be gathered with the unbelievers, their equals.<sup>97</sup>

As I conclude this by no means exhaustive section, it is worth underscoring that the Sunnī theological tradition needs these minorities to function as exemplars of misbelief, since they are ultimately what makes proper belief possible. Whether in the polemical accounts of Ibn Ḥazm and Ibn Taymiyya or in the more benign and quasi-scientific account of Shahrastānī, we must not lose sight of the fact that this literature is primarily interested in reducing other religions to dogmas or caricatures that can subsequently be conveniently—and, of course, problematically—compared to Sunnī Islam, which is held up as the lodestar.

This chapter has sought to show the anxiety that Jews and Judaism produced within the early Muslim community, something that only continued into those who sought to represent it in subsequent centuries. Here we should do well to remember that it was Judaism that was the religion that most closely resembled Islam on the Arabian Peninsula in late antiquity, especially if we keep in mind how A. F. L. Beeston referred to this Judaism less as some kind of rabbinic orthodoxy and more as, what he called, “Ḥimyarite Raḥmanism.”<sup>98</sup> Such proximity, not to mention the large number of “Jews” said to exist in Medina at the time of the *hijra*, meant that, from the very earliest period, the young community had to distance itself from Judaism. This was certainly no easy feat given the fact that the traces of Judaism permeated much early speculation found in the qur’ānic text.

We see this ambiguity toward Judaism clearly in the tropes of the “good” Jew and the “bad” Jew. Both of these literary figures would go on to perform important work in the clarification of Muslim thought and practice. The “bad” Jew tricks and threatens the community, often from within, whereas the “good” Jew seeks to undo the damage that he causes. The latter, always a convert, becomes the character that uncovers the filiations between ancient Jewish lore and tradition on the one hand, and the new message of Islam on the other. The one Jew, by necessity, needs the other for its existence, in much the same manner that Islam needs Judaism more generally to articulate itself.

These two literary types embody that ambiguity and the anxiety that Jews and Judaism produced for the framers of Islam. Jews are to be mistrusted, even when they become Muslims, because they seek—at least in the narrative that the subsequent Islamic tradition created for Judaism, itself based on the qur’ānic one—to undermine the religions of others. They did this previously to Christianity, and Muslims are warned to be on their guard lest they do it to Islam as well. At the same time, however, Judaism—its narratives, its monotheistic categories, and its prophetic pedigree—are essential to understanding the rise of the new message.

This anxiety, as we shall see in the following chapters, was not confined to Jews and Judaism. If anything, the tensions inherent to Muslim portrayals of Judaism are part of a much larger pattern of dealing with religious alterity.